

CATALAN POETRY OF THE MODERN AGE  
(SIXTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES)  
– SOME EXAMPLES OF ARTIFICE AND  
VISUALITY

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I will be referring in this work to some aspects relating to Catalan literature in the modern age, specifically to poetry. It is a period that is characterised by a series of specific traits of a socio-historic nature and historiographic evaluation, without some knowledge of which it cannot be interpreted properly from such a distance.

In the historiographic field, it was a long period – three centuries, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth and even a good part of the nineteenth – which had as a whole been labelled with the name of “Decadence” by scholars, drawing a parallel with the progressive loss of political weight by the Catalans and the annexation to the Hispanic monarchy.<sup>1</sup> We can certainly not display in this period creations comparable to the surrounding literatures. Despite all this, it was a fertile period in creations of a very varied type and, as has been revealed in more in-depth studies, one of great interest.

As Bernard Guenée wrote with regard to the concept of “Middle Ages”, the label of “Decadence” for a long period of Catalan cultural life also “grew out of disrespect”. In effect, the brilliance of Catalan production of the Middle Ages (Ramon Llull, the chronicles, *Tirant lo Blanch*, Ausiàs March, etc.), classed as “National Age” by scholars, on the one hand, and on the other as the literary recovery of the nineteenth century, coinciding with Romanticism, with the progressive revival of a collective conscious and of a political movement throughout that century and the start of the twentieth, led to the centuries between these two moments to be regarded as a stage of cultural lassitude. Comparable, then, to how the concept of Middle Ages was born, as an interval, a parenthesis “between the splendour of the Roman period and the age of the Renaissance”.<sup>2</sup>

What happened was that besides noting a lack of presence of Catalan in certain literary genres during these centuries or the impossibility of establishing an autochthonous tradition, the simple fact of applying such a negative term to a chronological period became both subterfuge and generic justification for excessively or permanently negative analyses of the literature that was produced in this period. Indirectly, it led to the appearance in documents on the period “preceding” the nineteenth-century Renaissance, whenever it came up against some contribution worthy of evaluation, of false precedents of recovery which were simply elements of continuity of autochthonous traditions that had stayed loyal to the language of the country during this period, which were confined to certain genres.

This distortion of perspective was not only created by a relative difference in quality of the literary creations of the period, in the cases where these were exhumed and studied, or to a direct assimilation of literary life with the process of the loss of political power, but it was also aggravated by the lack of rigorous studies and of impartial evaluations on this production due to various powerful prejudices. Among these, we should at least include the antagonism against Baroque aesthetics (the actual name used to define it does not have positive echoes) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (neo-Classic and Romantic aesthetics), and also an aprioristic rejection of the Castilianisation of literary language, perhaps understandable given the situation of conflict and imposition that occurred between Castilian Spanish and Catalan, but which led to an unfavourable interpretation of this literary phenomenon, which affected the educated minorities and occurred in a social context in which the majority language continued to be Catalan (including up until the nineteenth century, which enabled the otherwise impossible literary recovery).<sup>3</sup>

There was, naturally, a progressive interference of the Castilian language in the normal development of an autochthonous Catalan literature as the paths of politics led also to an ever more intense overlapping between the Spanish crown and the Catalan-speaking lands which, with different paces and fortunes, maintained the cultivation of literature in the local language, Catalan. We should insist that we are not speaking of an interference that should be seen to be bound to the everyday use of the language, but of the interposition of the literary models of the powerful literature in the Castilian language (as also and previously occurred with Italian, and

later, after the incorporation of Rosselló – Roussillon – into France, with French).

This was on the one hand. On the other was the appearance and extension of the printing press and the evaluation of the book in terms of a business of widespread distribution. In this new context, the productions that could only circulate in a more restricted area – also if, apart from this, they did not have public or private patronage to provide them with support – stayed in the sphere of manuscript circulation or were focused, even when printed, on specific popular genres or worship: and they did not reach, or they reached to a lesser extent, more demanding, more comparable levels of literary exigency.

In recent years, however, Catalan literature of the modern age has undergone a strong upsurge.<sup>4</sup> It has been studied more – even though there is still a long way to go – and better valued in terms of the Spanish and European historic and literary context, and it displays aspects that are by no means worthy of disdain. If nothing else, it allows us to see the attempts to establish literary projects that did not succeed for a number of reasons (literary in some cases, of a change of models; and also social or political, of lack of support, of patronage, of access to printing, etc.). In all, the study in recent years has enabled us to identify many more authors, rescue part of the poetic production that circulated in manuscript form in the Catalan language and value more adequately some of the more relevant printed works of the period.

From a bird's eye view, and focusing solely on poetry, in the sixteenth century the prestigious autochthonous model of the fifteenth-century poet Ausiàs Marc integrated with the Italian metric and thematic models of Petrarchism in a “modern” recovery – not a mediaeval leftover, as had traditionally been interpreted – of a classic author of the country, just as other European cultures were doing at that time. Authors such as Pere Serafí (?-1566/67), who went to press, attempted to put forward ideas and indicate a lyric path that generally, however, came to nothing (the same happened with the attempted epic of Joan Pujol, ?-1603?). A falling back in the second half of the century, with the staging of literary contests governed with an iron rod by the so-called mediaeval “Gaia Ciència”, marked a turn towards the intact preservation of Marc's work and against what was regarded as the appropriation by others, who were unable to interpret him correctly, of a national figure of pride for Catalans. The history of the re-editions of Marc's works, and of the contests that invoked the strict rules of tradition and set out to monopolise

poetic creation in the Catalan language and keep it immovable, stand as clear testimony of this process, known only in recent years. The perception of a loss in the country's influence, of its culture, of its institutions in the context of the Spanish monarchy – an early *patriotism* – is not outside this literary phenomenon, which has parallels in the growing interest in autochthonous history, the political model relating to the monarchy (free people, constitutions, original pact), our own sources of pride (heroes, noblemen, saints) or the region (cartography, natural wealth), not fully recounted enough by Aragonese and Castilian authors.

The seventeenth century saw a break, a clear renewal of the almost definitively stunted autochthonous tradition. It was provided by the Castilian Baroque models which, paradoxically, overturned the trend towards bilingualism or the definitive incorporation into Castilian literature. It is, in fact, the founding of a new tradition in which the contribution of these models also included, as well as or together with style elements, the appropriation of a model of Castilianised language through which it was intended to show that pieces comparable to those in vogue at that time in Castilian could also be created in Catalan. The cases of the priest Francesc Vicent Garcia, parish priest of Vallfogona (1578/79-1623), the jurist Francesc Fontanella (1622-1680/85) or the canon and professor Josep Romaguera at the turn of the century (1642-1723) are just a few of the many examples of this.

The incorporation of illuminism in the eighteenth century did not favour the literary use of Catalan. However, there occurred simultaneously a superposition of trends (Baroque epigonism in evolution towards Rococo) that sometimes affected the work of the same author and favoured minor, frivolous subjects, and meant that production in the Catalan language more often remained confined to private circles, ecclesiastic circles, the academies, and so on. Certainly, at the sessions of Barcelona's Acadèmia dels Desconfiats (of which a full and in-depth study remains to be done) the continuity of poetic writing in Catalan was in some way assured (this is not the case of Valencia where it was already in Castilian) for individual pleasure or by small educated groups. Despite everything, our literature had interesting authors, even though it is only recently that some have been rescued and studied in detail, such as religious scholar and Bishop Agustí Eura (1684-1763), the most significant author of the period. They opened up a path in Catalan poetry at the end of the century alongside the taste in late readings of the Baroque and sentimentalist and pre-Romantic trends.

Agustí Eura is specifically the author of an apology of the Catalan language and of a number of verses devoted to the “Catalan Muses”, whom he describes as maidens asking for a place at the academy, albeit as maids; besides many other aspects worthy of comment, on which we will not linger here, we find the following verses in relation to the work of these muses:

“Admet, doncs, oh Acadèmia, per criades  
estes Muses humils que, respectuoses,  
únicament per conservar-se honrades  
avorreixen la nota d’ocioses;  
filles són en ta glòria interessades,  
que anhelant a augmentar-la, *laborioses*,  
si el primor de la feina s’avalua  
no faran mal paper en casa tua.”<sup>5</sup>

I would like to highlight the word “laborioses” [industrious] to provide a basis for my commentary in this second part. Certainly, some “industrious muses”, as these Catalans wanted to be, had blazed a trail throughout Europe since the sixteenth century, amid others who were not quite so hard-working. I would like to refer to the taste for linguistic artifice, experimentalism and visuality that flooded European and Catalan poetry during these centuries and to offer just a few examples of this.<sup>6</sup>

On the one hand, since the seventeenth century – it has been called the century that served as the link between the word and the image – we find the appearance and development of the genre of *emblems* that became so widespread, linked to the supposed deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphics and with contradictory aims to some extent, both didactic and cryptic. The origins appear to have been manifold, since the first examples invoked from books of emblems (that of Andrea Alciato) were merely epigrams in the beginning (maybe intended for insignias or standards for chapels or costume, or for suggesting and commenting on images with this aim), and it was only later that the images, the engravings, which would have a long posterity in this form, were added to printed editions at the taste and decision of the editors.<sup>7</sup>

The emblem (also known as *badge* [*empresa*] or *device* [*divisa*]), with literary or pedagogical content, became connected with an already existing line, that of public holidays in honour of monarchs (accessions, coronations) that had been celebrated in the cities since the fourteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Afterwards, in the seventeenth century, in the festive or funerary context which was enormously extended and

enhanced with Baroque, they appeared on royal tombs, on ephemeral triumphal arches and in canonisation feasts. In the Catalan case, we have records of various tombs and feasts in Barcelona and Valencia, in which Catalan is not always present, whereas Latin and Castilian are.<sup>9</sup>

From public exhibition they again went on to books, although they were not the only form as they did so alongside many varieties of visual poetry and *laboriosa*, as we could call them. It was not simply a question of poetic texts accompanied by an engraving (or mutually illustrating each other, and usually with a Latin motto, as the emblem was normally presented) but with the text itself forming a graphic on the paper, heir of the Hellenistic *technopaegnia* or the mediaeval *carmina figurata* and forerunner of the calligram, as though in a sort of underground river of the whole of literary and artistic creation. These textual and visual creations were also offered to illustrious figures or were collected in writing in volumes once the public performance that had given rise to their creation and deployment was over.

The instructions offered, especially by Emmanuele Tesaurò and his impossible epigraphy (*Il cannocchiale aristotelico*, 1655), contributed to this, while the Spanish Jesuit Juan Caramuel (1606-1682) collected, extended and classified the great variety of *laboriosa* poetry for the first time: acrostics of various types, initials and medials, labyrinths and hieroglyphics, cubics, retrogressive verses, etc. (he invented the term *metametric* in his *Primus calamus...*, of 1663, to refer to this type of artifice beyond habitual versification), as collected by A. Petrucci, among others.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Catalan, both Pere Serafí in the sixteenth century and Francesc Fontanella in the seventeenth century wrote emblems (although we have them without images), although they are of a very different condition. Serafí translated some twenty emblems by La Perrière in the French metric of *dizains*, which went to press at the end of our Renaissance.<sup>11</sup> They comment an explanatory title and hold up perfectly without any image. Meanwhile, Fontanella left as manuscript his emblems prepared for the canonisation feasts of San Tomás de Villanueva (1658) and Santa Rosa (1671), some “hieroglyphics” – a name often given to emblems – for the beatification of Juan de la Cruz (1676) and a number of funeral emblems.<sup>12</sup> He left them prepared with their Latin mottos, generally biblical, a description of the designs or sketches that were supposed to accompany them and a brief epigram. Naturally, they are lacking if we cannot see the suggested image. The question is whether they

were really drawn and exhibited. We have to believe that they were, but the bibliography does not draw from the sources (or they do not exist) the relation of these public acts full of ephemeral creations.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, in 1681, however, Josep Romaguera wanted to renew Catalan prose (with the model of Gracián nearby) to show that it was possible to do so in a context that did not favour it, and he chose to write emblems newly accompanied by commentaries in an extremely learned prose. This was his *Atheneo de grandesa sobre eminències cultas. Catalana facundia de emblemas illustrada*, published in 1681 in honour of Sant Oleguer.<sup>13</sup>



Figure 1. A fragment of the emblems of J. Romaguera (1681).

In a fragment of the emblems of J. Romaguera (1681), dedicated to Narcissus, the image and the poem were preceded by a prose commentary (an *eminence*) on “Abominate affectation, aspiring to true excellence”. (Fig. 1) The poem, entitled “Ecos” contains a further artifice, the echo, an allusion to the effect of the mirror and a clear evocation of the myth of Echo and Narcissus.

Alongside the emblems, as we said, amid many other forms of artifice and restriction, acrostics (P. Serafi, poems to the ladies of the Barcelona society) and labyrinths were cultivated. As the former are a more widely known formula, we will look at the latter.

We find examples of sonnets in labyrinth form in the work of the prolific and celebrated Francesc Vicent Garcia (1578/79-1623, ed. 1703, but prior certainly to 1613 or 1614) in honour of Santa Teresa de Jesús, and of the monk from Ripoll and member of Barcelona’s Acadèmia dels Desconfiats Manuel de Vega i de Rovira (?-1705/1712?, ed. 1701) on the death of Carles II.<sup>14</sup> They are reproduced below.



Figure 2. Sonnet in labyrinth form by F. V. Garcia (1703).



We do not know if the Sonnet in labyrinth form by F. V. Garcia (1703; Fig. 2), dedicated to Teresa de Jesús, was publicly exhibited, but it is evident that if it was, the sonnet has two readings: from a distance we can see the name of the new saint written vertically six times and the name “Teresa” once horizontally (last verse), and only by going up close can we see the full content of the sonnet: the dialogue between Christ and Teresa.

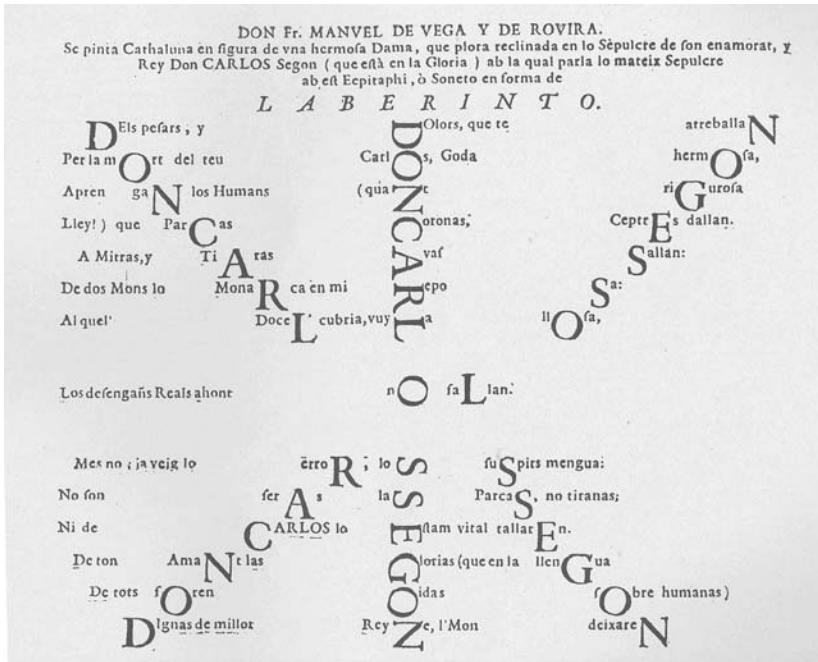


Figure 3. Sonnet in labyrinth form by Manuel de Vega (1701).

In the labyrinth-formed sonnet by Manuel de Vega (1701), dedicated to the death of King Carlos II, the layout is forced to give the image of the X-shaped cross and highlight the name of “Don Carlos Segon”, from top to bottom. The speaking epitaph addresses Catalonia “which cries reclined on the sepulchre of its beloved king”.

There are many more linguistic artifices and graphics in poems, which we cannot present here, such as the verses in monosyllables or in forced endings in monosyllables ending in -c, or the calligrams in the shape of a wheel or circular acrostics, the sextines that can still be found in the seventeenth century, and so on.

But we have another unique form of artifice that we feel to be of interest, the double and triple reading texts (in two or three languages at the same time), which A. Rossich has studied in detail. Let us look at a couple of examples, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Firstly, one attributed to Joan Timoneda, of Catalan-Castilian double reading (the most common), included in *Sarao de amor* (1561):

Soneto a la muerte de nuestro emperador Carlos quinto, en dos lenguajes

L'amarga, fatigosa y dura pena  
que causa del gran Carlos invencible  
la presta despedida, es imposible  
contarla, si dolor nos desordena.

De vates gloriosa la gran vena  
es impedida del dolor terrible,  
y en pena tan aguda y tan sensible  
es insensible peña el que no pena.

Si el gran Rey celestial a Carlos dava  
la general terrena monarchia,  
universal sera aquesta tristura,

y en relatar fatiga qu'es tan brava  
los versos faltaran; y l'amargura  
no faltara, que aumenta cada dia.<sup>15</sup>

As regards the Latin-Catalan double reading ones, which are rarer, most also include Castilian and are, therefore, triple reading. An example of a triple reading sonnet, also collected by Rossich (along with many others under study), is by Josep de Portell (seventeenth century):

*Soneto de musa catalana, castellana, latina*

Sol de Aquino, de esfera paragrina,  
heroica, excelsa, clara, prodigiosa,  
gloria de Italia, gracia misteriosa,  
arca de sciencia, fama de doctrina:

cathedras e infinita disciplina,  
academias de sapiencia gloriosa,  
methodos de obediencia religiosa,  
thronos fundas de sacra medicina.

Si declaras sentencias tan profundas,  
si tu frquantas citharas phebeas,  
si apollineas cantas circunstancias,

amplifica, Thomas, venas fecundas,  
adminstra poeticas ideas,  
metricas representa consonancias

They are poems that set out to give dignity and emphasis to the language and that we could consider to be a virtual proposal (on the condition of making certain graphic concessions, obviously): only intentional reading will produce the update in one or another language for the listener. The concept of virtuality is fully applicable to them, in such a way that they cannot be read at the same time in the different languages: if we choose one, we reject the other. The same thing happens with a whole series of verses in which the choice of an end or an ending (which is provided doubly) changes the meaning of the whole poem.

And one final example, which we do not know if it is isolated, of a sort of machine for making verses which incorporates a certain generation, albeit not random but well planned. Time would not allow for more. Let us take a look at it.

It is *Quartilla* by Marià Lloses (1784) on the birth of Princes Carles and Felip, the sons of the then Princess of Asturias, published in Tàrrrega.

“Gràcias a Déu, que ha donat  
a la Espània successió;  
gràcias al rei savi i bo,

1, 9; 5, 9; 5, 6; 5, 6; 3, 9; 4, 9; 1, 6; 2, 9; 5, 6; 3, 8; 5, 8;

1, 6; 5, 9; 3, 7; 1, 6; 1, 8; 4, 8; 2, 7; 2, 9; 1, 6; 4, 9.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 0

a, b, c, d, e, 6

f, g, h, i, k, 7

l, m, n, o, p, 8

q, r, s, t, u, 9

Cada lletra, en àngul recte,  
dos números fa parlar;  
combina'ls ab los de dalt,  
que ells te formaran lo vers.”<sup>16</sup>

So, if we follow the instructions, we end up composing the missing fourth verse: “que estar en pau ha lograt” [that at peace has managed to be]. The machine works by reading the attached double entry table and solves the relative intrigue of knowing how the little, insignificant poem will end.

To conclude, we can say that it is no bad thing to recover the archaeology – as Rodríguez de la Flor qualified it – of the “versos laboriosos”, sometimes ridiculed as “recreational philology”. The effort to overcome the page and the frame of the sheet, to generate new or varied readings, to make the reader collaborate with a non-trivial effort in the labyrinthine path, in the execution of the representation on paper, in the concretion or update of the diverse possibilities presented by this poetry that we could call visual, or even virtual (they are emblems, labyrinths or double reading texts). Isn't this as well *ergodic* poetry in the terms put forward by Espen Aarseth? Certainly it is a way of interpreting this parcel, this underground river, sometimes welling up, of European and Catalan poetry. At least it is the archaeology of a present ergodism, already announced and prefigured by these laborious efforts of artifice and linguistic and visual experimentalism that is now a palpable reality due to the immense capacity of movement on screen, of involvement of sound and image, of calculation and random generation that the digital world has contributed to creation for some years now and today, in a constant evolution that does not cease. The concerns of our Modern Age poets would have been satisfied and exceeded with the machinations of today: perhaps it is worth discovering their creative realities to be able to devote ourselves to progressing even further.

## NOTES

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1. A. Rubió i Lluch is the author of the periodisation of our literature in three large blocs: National Age (thirteenth to fifteenth centuries), Decadence (sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries) and Renaissance. His son Jordi Rubió i Balaguer contributed relevantly to the study of Catalan literature of the modern age in the chapters devoted to this in *Historia general de las literaturas hispánicas* (G. Diaz-Plaja, dir), v. IV and V (1953-1958), which appeared years later in Catalan (see Bibliography). The great manual by M. de Riquer (*Història de la literatura catalana*, 3 v., 1964), which is very comprehensive as regards the mediaeval

part, is very poor in its focus on this period. I follow P. Valsalobre (2004) in a recent panoramic revision.

2. Guenée (1980, 9 et seq.)
3. I would refer you here to the series of articles and leading contributions of A. Rossich, P. Valsalobre and certain other authors (see References), where you will find an extensive bibliography on the need to do away with this label and on the change of perspective that should be adopted when analysing the production of this period.
4. The advance that has taken place has materialised in many initiatives, among which we should mention the appearance of the first complete university manuals of the period, specifically at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, with a view to setting up two virtual education subjects on the period, with the most active research groups that there are in Catalonia being responsible for the analysis and evaluation of the literary production of the modern age, namely those of the universities of Barcelona and Girona. (see Solervicens, and Valsalobre from References).
5. Eura (2002), 492.
6. The bibliography for the case of Catalonia and from the point of view of philology is not particularly numerous. G. Grilli devoted an extensive article to it in the 1980s and A. Rossich has also been working here for some time (double and triple reading texts); and both announced a joint work on the subject. The recent manuals and anthologies should be looked at, and material contributed by art historians should be used.
7. Balavoine (1981) and Sebastián (1995).
8. Massip (1994), among other works by this author.
9. Pedraza (1999) and Galindo (1991). And the works of Víctor Mínguez.
10. Petrucci (1993), Rodríguez de la Flor (1995), Cózar (1991).
11. Romeu (2001).
12. Fontanella (1995).
13. Romaguera (1980 [1681], 43 et seq.) See also Grilli (1985, 321).

14. The death of this king was the occasion for two published collections of artifice poems: *Nenias reales y lágrimas obsequiosas...* (1701); and *Lágrimas amantes* (1701).
15. Rossich (1996, 508).
16. In Campabadal i Bertran (2003-2004, 80).

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